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ABSTRACT

One of the most important decisions that parents make is choosing child care for their children. Child care consumer education provides parents with the information they need to help them assess their needs, locate services, evaluate quality, and choose the best possible care for their children. There are two broad strategies for disseminating child care consumer education information: direct consultation with parents and multimedia public awareness campaigns. Many parents obtain information about choosing high-quality child care through telephone or face-to-face contacts with community-based child care resource and referral agencies. To augment these individualized strategies, national, state, and community organizations develop multimedia public awareness campaigns designed to provide consumers, potential consumers, employers, and others in the community with general information on the importance of high-quality child care. States and local communities have also begun exploring the use of computer technology to deliver child care related information to families. There are, however, a number of challenges to providing effective child care consumer education on the Internet. In designing online strategies, consumer educators need to provide information that is: (1) responsive to the needs of families looking for high-quality child care and presented from the consumer's point of view, with literacy and language needs met; (2) easy-to-find, continually updated, and well-publicized to the target audiences; and (3) one of many child care consumer education strategies used in a community. The Internet provides the opportunity for families to access an enormous amount of information; however, it also has obstacles around which a family may have to maneuver in order to be successful in accessing needed information. As more information is made available through the Internet, we will need to continue to study, evaluate, and improve consumer education initiatives to best meet the child care needs of all children and their families--both online and off. (LPP)

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Child Care Consumer Education on the Internet

Anne Goldstein

One of the most important decisions that parents make is choosing child care for their children. Families need high-quality, affordable child care so that they can balance the demands of family and work life and be successful as parents and as workers. Child care consumer education provides parents with the information they need to help them assess their needs, locate services, evaluate quality, and choose the best possible care for their children.

Child Care Consumer Education Strategies

There are two broad strategies for disseminating child care consumer education information: direct consultation with parents and multimedia public awareness campaigns. Many parents obtain information about choosing high-quality child care through telephone or face-to-face contacts with community-based child care reso...ce and referral agencies. This approach gives parents personalized attention, allows the consumer educator to tailor information to each family's needs, and supports the child care decision-making efforts of parents (Mitchell, Cooperstein, & Larner, 1992).

To augment these individualized strategies, national, state, and community organizations develop multimedia public awareness campaigns designed to provide consumers, potential consumers, employers, and others in the community with general information on the importance of high-quality child care. These campaigns may involve the distribution of various printed materials, such as brochures, pamphlets, checklists to help parents identify high-quality care, fact sheets, and articles. Other community-wide strategies used to communicate the message include billboards and announcements on public transportation. Some campaigns have also included flyers containing general messages about the importance of high-quality care as an enclosure with utility bills.

In addition to these print resources, multimedia public awareness campaigns include videotapes that may be shown in hospital maternity centers, doctors' offices, health clinics, and social service agencies, and public service announcements (PSAs) for radio and television. Many communities have used local events such as health fairs and school functions as further opportunities to share child care consumer education information.

States and local communities have also begun exploring the use of computer technology to deliver child care related information to families when and where they need it. These initiatives have included specialized CD-ROMs, kiosks in shopping malls and other public spaces, electronic bulletin boards, and targeted Web sites on the Internet.

Child Care Consumer Education on the Internet

One example of a nationwide multimedia consumer education campaign that integrates Internet-based resources is Child Care Aware (http://www.naccrra.net/childcareaware/index.htm). Child Care Aware provides parents with information on what high-quality child care is and helps them seek high-quality child care in their communities. Child Care Aware's toll-free parent information line (800-424-2246) and World Wide Web site help parents locate resource and referral agencies in their community and provide information about high-quality care. Checklists to assist families in measuring the quality of a child care home or center and other materials are available in print and on the Internet.

As this example indicates, the Internet, especially when coupled with other modes of information dissemination, can be an effective mechanism for getting out the message that high-quality child care is important to children, families, and communities. There are, however, a number of challenges to providing effective child care consumer education on the Internet. In designing online strategies, consumer educators need to provide information that is:

- **Responsive to the needs of families looking for high-quality child care and presented from the consumer's point of view, with literacy and language needs met.**

Families come in all sizes, with varying needs and desires for their children's care. To be most responsive to families, "the language and thought process of the parent seeking child care (i.e., the consumer) should inform the design and delivery of consumer education" (Mitchell, Cooperstein, & Larner, 1992, p. 35). Currently, not all families who need child care information have access to the Internet, and most consumer education resources on the Internet do not reflect the diversity of the families seeking child care. However, efforts are being made to provide access to the Internet in public spaces such as libraries, and although the majority of the information available on the Internet is in English, sites such as the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) (http://npin.org/respar/texts/chldcare/deleasu.html) and the National Network for Child Care (http://www.nncc.org/Choose.Quality.Care/spanish.choose.html) provide materials for families in both Spanish and English.

The sheer volume of child care consumer education information available on the Internet, combined with the non-specific nature of the material, may require parents to invest a great deal of their time and resources in order to use the available information effectively. Many families may not be able to spend hours online seeking child care information or waiting for pages with large graphics to download. Parents accessing Internet-based consumer education resources may experience frustrations caused by basic technological difficulties, such as busy signals, site transience, the disorganized nature of Internet search resources, and lack of controlled indexes (Urr, 1995).

- **Easy-to-find, continually updated, and well-publicized to the target audiences.**

While child care information is abundant on the Internet, finding community-specific information may be difficult. Parents seeking electronic information may have to visit a large number of sites to get all the information they need. One option for alerting information seekers to potentially useful Web sites is to utilize online and offline marketing strategies. Announcements, flyers, and other print resources used in the public awareness campaign should refer families to useful Web sites.

The variety of organizations posting child care information on the Internet also creates challenges for parents because each site is organized in a different way with a different purpose in mind. Once families have located sites that contain child care information, an effective *information architecture* is the key to guiding information seekers to what they need within the Web site (Davenport, 1997). Web sites may utilize marquee-style messages (one type of Java applet) or linked graphics that guide users toward specific content areas of the site. For example, the State of Ohio uses an eye-catching graphic strategically placed on its main page (http://www.state.oh.us/) to point families to state child care resources elsewhere on the site.

- **One of many child care consumer education strategies used in a community.**

Many state and local child care resource and referral agencies utilize the Internet as an effective communication system for sharing information. Combining the immediacy of information on the Internet with the timely, reliable information available from these community-based agencies may provide the most useful information for parents.

The California Child Care Resource and Referral Network (http://www.rrnetwork.org) Web site provides information for parents such as "Who to call for free help in finding child care in California," "Tips for finding child care that works best for your family," resource and referral child care data, and an index of the state-funded resource and referral agencies. Initiatives for Children, Inc. (http://www.ini-children.org/) is a resource and referral agency serving Houston and Southeast Texas. Initiatives for Children's home page includes information on their services and facts about child care. It also has an online form available for their referral services. Requests for referrals can also be received by phone or fax.

Communities participating in the MOST Initiative (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) are also using the Internet to increase access to local information. One of these, the Seattle MOST Initiative (http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/most/), used information from the local resource and referral agency to create an Internet-based comprehensive database of out-of-school time activities for children and youth. The online database can be accessed at parent resource centers, schools, libraries, and community organizations throughout the city. The database is available as free Windows software and in a print version to agencies that serve families. In addition to the database, the Seattle MOST Web site includes information about the need for high-quality care for school-age children and links to child care and other community databases. A parallel home page is available in Spanish (http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/most/espanol/).

States are also using the Internet as one part of their strategy to meet the needs of families. Many states have created successful Web sites that provide families with information about child care subsidy programs, child care resource and referral agencies in the state, lists of licensed and regulated child care providers, and information on choosing high-quality child care. North Carolina created a child care Web site titled "What Parents Should Know about Child Care" (http://www.dhr.state.nc.us/DHR/DCD/parents.htm) that includes child care resources and related information, including early intervention resources.

Conclusion

One of the most positive aspects of electronic information dissemination is the ease with which information providers can link with other sites to enhance and broaden the resources available to parents. The fundamental task for consumer educators in providing child care consumer education on the Internet consists of collecting useful information, synthesizing it into a format that meets the needs of families, and presenting it in a timely and interesting way to the user. To help families find needed information easily, consumer educators might consider adopting standards for site architecture and indexing/cataloging of sites.

The Internet provides the opportunity for families to access an enormous amount of useful information. It also has obstacles and pitfalls around which a family may have to maneuver in order to be successful in accessing child care information. As more information is made available through this electronic resource, we will need to continue to study, evaluate, and improve consumer education initiatives to best meet the child care needs of all children and their families—both online and off.

For More Information

Child Care Action Campaign: (212) 239-0138.

Child Care Aware: (800) 424-2246; http://www.naccrra.net/childcareaware/index.htm

Davenport, Thomas H. (1997). *Information ecology: Mastering the information and knowledge environment.* New York: Oxford University Press.

I Am Your Child: (888) 447-3400; http://www.iamyourchild.org

Mitchell, Anne, Cooperstein, Emily, & Larner, Mary. (1992). *Child care choices, consumer education—and low-income families.* New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University. ED 357 836.

National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies: (202) 393-5501; http://www.naccrra.net

National Association for the Education of Young Children: (800) 424-2460; http://www.naeyc.org

National Association for Family Child Care: (800) 359-3817; http://www.nafcc.org/

National Child Care Information Center: (800) 616-2242; http://nccic.org

National Institute on Out-of-School Time: (781) 283-2547; http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW/SAC/

Urr, Clifford. (1995). *Internet business application: A white paper.* Reston, VA: James Martin & Co.

References identified with an ED (ERIC document), EJ (ERIC journal), or PS number are cited in the ERIC database. Most documents are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 1,000 locations worldwide and can be ordered through EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. Journal articles are available from the original journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses such as: UnCover (800) 787-7979, UMI (800) 732-0616, or ISI (800) 523-1850.

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